

# Spying on the Mail

One little-known service provided by the U.S. Postal Service is spying on people's mail, at the behest of various government sleuths. The public is indebted to a House Judiciary subcommittee for illuminating this practice in recent hearings. We trust that Congress will not delay very long in putting some needed limitations on such snooping, which has been conducted all too loosely in the past.

In fact, the House inquiry found that mail surveillance is carried out not only for federal investigatory agencies with responsibilities in fields of national security and criminal justice, but also for units of state government. Even for a state real estate commission, the Postal Service performed this function, and it has supplied state welfare agencies with information about personal mail. Of course the FBI is a prime utilizer of the service, but there, too, is the Department of Agriculture, wanting people's letters looked at in the interest of tracking down food-stamp violations.

In its surveillance, called "mail covers," the Postal Service doesn't actually open the envelopes. The process consists of recording names and addresses of the sender and receiver, and anything else on the outside of the envelope, if this is requested by a federal, state, or even a local law agency. Under postal regulations, the grounds for doing this may be national security, the need to apprehend a fugitive, or gathering of information to solve a crime. That latter definition, especially, could be stretched very wide, to include masses of people, if au-

thorities simply wanted to fish around. According to Postal Service testimony, of the 8,586 mail covers conducted in 1973 and 1974, just 544 were for alleged national security purposes.

Of course mail can be opened with a search warrant, and this happened 431 times in that period. But some members of Congress are quite right, we think, in wanting to extend this requirement to surveillance as well. The Postal Service itself objects, thinking this might hamper its own mail fraud investigations, which is a weak argument. If there is any evidence of wrongdoing, a search warrant isn't all that hard to obtain, and agencies simply cannot expect to be freed of legal inconveniences. Where restraints are lax, as some appalling episodes elsewhere in the government have taught us lately, the possibility of abuse abounds. Certainly the idea that personal mail can be spied upon rather easily is offensive to our conception of privacy as a fundamental right.

The effort to correct this is embodied in legislation offered by Representative Charles Mosher of Ohio and Senator Charles Mathias of Maryland. Their envisioned new restrictions also extend to wiretapping, bugging, official access to records of private transactions and other matters of surveillance. It is a mission of protection for the individual which Congress should have undertaken long ago. When bureaucracies are left with too much power to interpret individual rights to suit themselves, something valuable is being lost, by all of us.

## All in the Family

In addition to everything else, the CIA is now being blamed for the spiritual downfall of Maharaj Ji, the once-popular teen-age guru who was just denounced by, of all people, his mother, who called him a playboy of the Western world. An official of the Divine Light Mission in New Delhi, India, said he suspects the CIA of leading the 17-year-old guru and/or playboy astray, but he offered neither motive nor evidence to substantiate his shocking charge. If Maharaj Ji ultimately loses favor with his 8 million Indian devotees — as seems likely if his mom keeps popping off — plus the estimated 50,000 fans in this country, Mama Ji has a replacement lined up and ready to go: Maharaj's older brother, Bal, who is 24.